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Groupwork Vol. 16(2), 2006, pp.25-42. © Whiting & Birch Ltd, 2006

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# Changing perceptions: Creating new identities in the work place

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**Abstract:** In collaboration with Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment (ASPIRE), Work Opportunities Unlimited, Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), The Children's Cabinet and DHHS case managers, a twelve week peer support program was established which resulted in participants not only getting to tell their life stories and be heard, but more importantly getting to rediscover the roots of their own resiliency. Resiliency theories often relate to the abilities of children to navigate through the complex issues of trauma and recovery. Seldom do we consider the application of such theories to adult life situations. Utilizing the group process that explored both the pain and resiliency of individuals who have had tremendous barriers to employment and feeling successful in the world, through peer support and problem solving with the Children's Cabinet, many obstacles were resolved. In review of each adult's life story one could observe both the barriers and opportunities that were embedded in the relational fabric of their life events.

**Keywords:** groups, employment, welfare, resilience, strengths perspective, vulnerability, peer support, individual growth, parents, children

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## Introduction

When the conditions and circumstances of life keep you trapped in a high level of poverty, whether by economic status, racial status, social status, emotional status, learning difficulties, trauma or relational conflict, the realm of hope and possibility can become unimaginable. Stories and images of such life experiences have shaped and formed one's perception of life. Such conditional tendencies thrive in an atmosphere of impoverishment and hopelessness. Self-efficacy and the ability to assert personal needs, strengths, passions or desires are challenged by internalized standards of distrust, low self-esteem and the constant message of victimization and tragedy.

Penetrating such personalized hostility and discontentment can be difficult. Making sense out of our own personal life stories and myths is the basic dilemma facing all human beings. In the past social, political, cultural and religious myths acted as safe containers for individual familial and communal reality. The break down and fragmentation of such containers has made individual narratives and personal mythic involvement a paramount activity. Joseph Campbell articulates this need so well in his belief that modern mankind faces an unparalleled dilemma of needing to develop a deeper personal mythology in order to find collective meaning in life (Campbell, 2004).

For people who have been oppressed through significant trauma, loss and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is common, and self-esteem is constantly eroded by feelings of not being adequate to organize around their cultural values. In fact, such a culture of materialism and entitlement within American life leaves scarcely little possibility or hope at the bottom income level.

The familial, educational, political, cultural and social boundaries and structures of the adult world have created myths that prohibit such acceptance. Saint-Exupery points out that 'grown ups love figures' and therefore disregard essential matters. When you tell them about making new friends, adults ask 'how old is he? How many brothers and sisters has he? How much does he weigh? How much does his father make?' There is never any talk about the sound of the person's voice, or the games that they love best, or whether they collect butterflies. (Saint-Exupery, 1971, pp.16-17).

## **Work Opportunities Program**

Work Opportunities Unlimited, is a private agency devoted to helping people overcome barriers to employment. Regional offices are located throughout New England and along the Eastern seaboard of the United States. The Portland Maine division offers employment resources to both adults and young adults in the greater Portland community. Resources include group support, career resource specialists, and other professional personnel that evaluate, consult, educate, mentor and place clients in appropriate job settings.

Because of welfare reform at the national level, States are required to make a significant decrease in their case loads. Don Comeau, DHHS program administrator for Cumberland County found that a large majority of welfare recipients were faced with difficult barriers to overcome. As a result he felt that it was hard for people to think about a job when they were overwhelmed in seeking child care, medical care, housing and food. Without the basic necessities of life such welfare recipients operate with a great deal of fear and apprehension. ASPIRE offers classes in order to help welfare recipients with completing job applications, talking about going on a job interview, completing a resumé and other related topics. However, the more basic fears and concerns are seldom addressed or resolved.

Work Opportunities Unlimited consulted with DHHS and the ASPIRE program reviewing the aforementioned needs and problems. As a result Changing Perceptions Creating New Identities in The Work Place was created in a collaboration between ASPIRE, Work Opportunities, and Dr. Bruce St Thomas, one of the authors. When people have lived in a culture of poverty and personal trauma and tragedy the traditional approach of providing job seeking skills like how to build a resumé and interviewing doesn't work. More importantly there needs to be a deeper exploration and understanding of human survival. It's not about getting employment it's about helping to rediscover the emotional resources and skills necessary in overcoming the fears that prohibit normal life and finding a job. Very often living close to poverty makes it impossible to utilize the resources that are so naturally available to the rest of the culture.

The design of the collaborative program had to somehow address employment issues along with the issues of self-esteem, self-efficacy,

social relationships, emotional skills and trauma based life experiences. As a result a twelve week program was established that formed an initial focus on building safety and trust within a peer support group that could begin exploring personal strength, vulnerability and resilience. The first three sessions explored life stories. During these sessions group members focused on what allowed them to prosper and navigate throughout the various phases of their lives. Drawing activities and writing formed the initial structure in creating a personal life story. Guided imagery was utilized in further investigating what positive intentions helped create purpose, hope and a sense of well being. Hopes, dreams, abilities, skills, passions, interests, strengths and the like were further explored and shared through a focusing activity. The Myers Briggs, a self-efficacy questionnaire, How Effective Am I Questionnaire further identified strengths related to possible job opportunities. A portfolio of everything that the participants discovered was developed with each person. During the last six weeks of the group emphasis was placed on developing problem solving skills, decision making abilities, overcoming personal barriers, networking skills and dealing with personal triggers.

In addition to the formatted content of the group each group member had a Career Resource Specialist working with them outside of the group. The Children's Cabinet was made up of DHHS specialist and available to all participants throughout the group process. Close communication occurred between the group facilitators and individual case managers from ASPIRE. Each group session started with a personal check in and stories read from Small Graces (Nerburn, 1998). Overall the larger collaborations created an atmosphere of support and the opportunity to directly address any additional barriers.

## **Theoretical concepts**

### **Resilience, vulnerability and strength**

Resilience as a concept emerged in the 1970s, representing a paradigm shift from psychopathology to the identification of protective and risk factors, which differentiate resilience. Generally, resilience refers to 'manifested competence in the context of significant challenges to adaptation' (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998, p. 206). Some researchers

view resilience as interactional in nature and define it as a 'dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation within the context of significant adversity' (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 543). In contrast, others consider resilience to be an attribute or trait of the individual. Viewed from this perspective, it is the

ability to maintain adaptive functioning or to regain functioning in the presence of one or more risk factors without experiencing one or more serious long-term harmful outcomes. (Nash & Bowen, 1999)

Although there is no general consensus on how resilience is conceptually operationalized or used in various research contexts, most researchers seem to examine two important concepts that are intrinsically present in the understanding of resilience: risk factors and protective factors. Although risk factors refer to conditions that increase the likelihood of developing a problem, protective factors imply conditions that buffer, interrupt, or prevent problems from occurring (Greene, 2002). An accentuated focus on protective factors has significantly contributed to the understanding of how people negotiate and cope with risk in the face of adverse circumstances (Greene & Conrad, 2002).

Resiliency theories often relate to the abilities of children to navigate through the complex issues of trauma and recovery. Seldom do we consider the application of such theories to adult life situations. The aforementioned theories underscore the importance of protective factors that buffer or prevent problems from occurring. Children who remain resilient often have adult models and life opportunities that normalize and legitimize conflictual and traumatic material by holding constant the patterns and rituals that help organize reality. Many of our group participants had children, however barriers such as the need for childcare, for child therapeutic and medical services and for day care loomed large as obstacles to employment opportunities. Children were the top priorities in these parents' lives. Through peer support and problem solving with the Children's Cabinet, many of these obstacles were resolved. Coupled with these barriers, every parent wished for opportunities regarding the welfare of their children. Group facilitators capitalized on the members' positive regard for their children as a natural segue to the underlying negative opinion frequently held regarding themselves. In review of each adult's life story one could observe both the

barriers and opportunities that were embedded in the relational fabric of their life events. As each participant was asked to illustrate how they survived and found meaning throughout their life span, positive and negative memories emerged. Most important to each participant were the relationships that felt supportive, nurturing and loving. Rediscovering the significance of the positive images within their life stories resulted in a rekindling of internal hope and resiliency.

The concept of vulnerability is closely associated with resilience and suggests that at-risk people are more likely to develop an undesirable outcome or disorder than others (Greene & Conrad, 2002). Given the conceptual complexities of resilience, it is important to take stock of the individual factors, family dynamics, and environmental predicaments within which resilience develops. Such a conceptual framework is likely to provide a useful yet multidimensional conceptualization of resilience. Focus on these individual, familial, and environmental risk and protective factors and their influence on the landscape of reunification and reentry opens new avenues for exploration, which lead to more effective interventions for children and families.

Although strengths and resilience have often been used interchangeably in the literature, Goldstein (1997) sees resilience as the attribute that epitomizes and operationalizes the conceptual framework of the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective emphasizes the resources, assets, potentials and capabilities of individuals, groups, families, and communities (Saleebey, 1997). This approach also marks a paradigmatic break from the typical human service perspective, which has focused far too long on pathology and deficits. Traditionally, professionals were asking about what was wrong with people and communities. The strengths perspective asks about what is right. The focus shifts from problems, liabilities, and pathologies to strengths, possibilities and solutions with which people construct their own futures (Brueggemann, 2002; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). The strengths perspective emphasizes such concepts as empowerment, dialogue, and collaboration. Throughout the group process participants frequently engaged in activities that underscored the practice of self-efficacy, self-advocacy, self-care and the critical experience of making decisions, problem solving and networking.

## **Groupwork**

In review of the literature both authors feel that the groupwork research begins to underscore the key elements in the program. Of particular importance are the impact of peer support, discovering common concerns, networking with peers, sharing personal stories in a social context and resiliency as it relates to overcoming adversity, trauma and loss. Within a strengths based perspective group members are invited at many levels to explore and understand that the tools, insights and changes are located within themselves.

In a seminal article, 'the Social worker in the Group', Schwartz (1961) defined the helping group as follows:

The group is an enterprise in mutual aid, an alliance of individuals who need each other, in varying degrees, to work on certain common problems. The important fact is that this is a helping system in which the clients need each other as well as the worker. This need to use each other, to create not one but many helping relationships, is a vital ingredient of the group process and constitutes a common need over and above the specific task for which the group was formed. (p.18)

This assertion of Schwartz's was reinforced by our group. Over the course of the twelve weeks, we observed them incorporating a number of roles which are identified in the literature. For example, there was a dialectic role, many members of the groups were able to take risks, share ideas and use the group as a sounding board – a place for their views to be challenged and possibly changed. When this type of group culture is present, the argument between two or more members takes on a dialectical nature. Group members can listen to each other.

A second benefit of the group was the feeling of support. Support groups are composed of people who share a similar set of challenging circumstances and who can help one another through an exchange of their experiences, ideas and feelings (Wasserman & Danforth, 1988). Again, as will be presented later in the paper, many of the participants found the group to be extremely supportive. Indeed the best support groups usually provide some information about the problem that members share and for which they seek to develop coping behaviors.

A third benefit to the group process is that often group members discover that feelings of other members of the group are similar to their own feelings. They also discover the reassuring fact that they are not alone in their feelings. When group participants no longer feel alone or overwhelmed by a problem, or that they are not the only one experiencing these problems, they are often better able to mobilize themselves to deal with the problem productively. According to Shulman, this is the 'all in the same boat phenomenon.' (Shulman, 1999).

A fourth group purpose that can be identified with this program is that of an educational group. The purpose of social work educational groups is to help members gain new knowledge that will influence their psychosocial functioning. According to (Kuechler, 1997), educational groups are generally time-limited, informative and structured to facilitate the learning of new information, behaviors and relationship skills. Again, the authors would claim, that our group complies with this assertion.

Another opportunity the group process provides is that when the group culture supports the open expression of feelings, group members can empathize with each other. With the group leader setting the tone through expression of personal feelings and understanding of others, each member is able to observe the powerful effect of empathy. Since group members share some common concerns, they are often able to understand each other's feelings in a deeper way than the worker. This expression of empathy is an important healing agent for both the group member who receives it and the one who offers it. Again, the authors would assert that this occurrence occurred in our twelve week program.

Thus, the preceding theories, the authors believe provide a theoretical philosophy describing the work that was undertaken over the course of the twelve week program.



## **The program and individual stories**

### **Individual growth and group experience**

As people identify their source of connection and their ability to have hope, they also identify their strength and resilience. It is this same strength that often becomes their 'Achilles Heel.' One group member talks about her sensitivity. Her poetry and concern about her son, nature and empathy for others reflect this sensitivity. Unless she takes care of this ability and shares it with people who appreciate these skills then she can be triggered and scapegoated by others who can put her down. A male group member knows that stability and security are top on his list, but he is unable to take risks and will not leave his home. He cannot discover new possibilities for employment unless he takes the risk to move outside of his comfort zone in order to explore opportunities.

The three R's (Rest, Reflect, Refocus) become a concept that can be used at times when people are triggered or over-whelmed. One woman enters the group agitated and hopeless. Letting go of her emotional response she realizes that prayer would be more helpful. Other group members support her choice and remind her that prayer will surround her with the love and support that she deserves while giving her the space for something else to emerge. Most group members have had significant traumas in their lives. Their ability to move out of a reactive (flight, fright) response is paramount to their ability to pursue a job, to maintain friendships, and to sustain their focus. Rest, Reflect, and Refocus become a standard, well understood phase within the group.

Guided imagery invites people to move closer to their intention of what it is that helps them feel safe as well as what can help them prosper. Mindful exercises create an atmosphere whereby people have the opportunity of stopping and reflecting inwardly for insights regarding their life struggles. During this specific guided imagery group members were invited to take one last look at their life stories. Next, the guided imagery took each participant into an imaginary forest where they located a place of comfort and safety. Once they were comfortable each person was introduced to a wise person who would help them understand at a deeper level what their true intention or

strength might be in their ability to survive and to change. One woman imagines Doves and Flowers in her forest guided imagery. When a wise person is introduced, she imagines her dead mother, greets her and points out to her that she has many strengths and that she couldn't be who she is without going through what she has in her life. Another woman found protection in a pile of leaves. A wise person greets her with divine light. Non-verbally he advises that she share her sensitivity with people who would appreciate it.

A man within the group finds himself on a large rock during the guided imagery. He felt safe and stable but stuck. A wise person helps him understand that he needs to calm his mind in order to tolerate some change and transition by moving off his rock to find a job that can create greater stability. Another group member finds herself on a tree swing during the guided imagery. Before her is a circle of flowers and a community of people are behind the flowers singing for help. She became in touch with wanting to work in a community where her skills and abilities as a CNA are wanted and needed.

### **Strength and vulnerability**

As each person's stories get enriched and made more and more visible, so also are their strengths and vulnerabilities. Interestingly vulnerabilities and strengths go hand in hand. The more each person feels comfortable managing their vulnerabilities, the better able they are to move forward in identifying their passions, interests, strengths, talents and true intentions. Self-efficacy is critical in the search for meaning. The program makes links between individual's stories, their natural abilities, inventories that assess interests and strengths, networking both within the group and with specific needs concerning child care, transportation and the like, and working with Career Resource Specialists to actually explore work opportunities.

By teaching people that their own life story holds the meaning of their lives and holds the potential for future possibility and resilience, we open the door to change and transformation. The issue of post-traumatic stress disorder is common for people who have utilized welfare. Affect regulation is also difficult for this population. The tendency to respond in an alarmed state and to project anxiety in every moment is common. People in such states do not feel entitled. Quite

the opposite, they suffer from a form of human oppression that leaves no door open to imagination, nor to possibility. If people are able to overcome these barriers, they must feel trust and the safety to explore and expand their understanding of themselves.

One group member entered the group in a very angry and agitated state of mind. She was unable to focus and her anger darted from her ASPIRE case worker to her ex-boyfriend and to financial problems. Her first response was to leave the group. Group members were able to remind her that in fact in her life story she had shared a conflictual past fraught with episodes of fleeing from difficult life situations. In the present situation they were able to invite her to rest while they devised a method via scribble drawing to both express and hold some of her anxiety. All group members participated and shared their own art in an effort to support and collaborate. This resulted in the immediate release of energy with an opportunity for reflection, insight and redirection. Group members were also able to offer empathy, support and brain storming.

### **Process and content issues**

In *American Dream* Jason DeParle, refers to the multi-generational suffering and human oppression as it relates to the ongoing struggle for personal meaning and empowerment. Each of the subjects in his study not only succumb to the barriers and anxiety that they face in themselves and within their relationships, but also recall the ongoing suffering of their relatives and ancestors.

Angie one of the more hopeful women in her writing honors her ancestors 'who worked and cried' to get her where she is today. Her poem both illustrates the struggle and hardship along with the unanswered questions.

Better days are here, so they say. So why am I still working, running,  
fighting, and crying? For my better days? Or is it so my descendants can  
know of the work imputing for their better days?

One of the group participants Tammy Herrick went public with her story. Tammy grew up in a family where her mother and other family members were on welfare. Tammy describes a certain amount

of fear and apprehension about imagining letting go of the benefits and familiarity of welfare. She believed that welfare is not a positive way to survive but had become a predictable, fearful way to live. Tammy believes that by staying attached to welfare benefits she and many of her family members became 'fearful to get out there and work.' Tammy was very aware of the fear in herself and was able through the group process to imagine hope and the possibility of change.

Embedded at a deeper level in Tammy's life story was a passion for singing. As a child and later in her adult life, singing had become a vehicle for community support and a means of lifting her spirits from the grip of depression and a low self-esteem. Tammy found her love of cooking re-kindled in the workplace. She also felt a relief from the anxiety that previously colored her perception of the workplace as unfriendly and critical if not dangerous. Tammy likes her work supervisor and has found friends amongst her work peers. More importantly Tammy feels that her ability to change her perception and to feel her success has provided a positive model for her children who are now young adults.

Parallel with her personal growth and activity has been a renewed interest in her church choir. Tammy hopes to someday lead young girls toward singing as a means of re-discovering their own voice and their self-healing. Tammy believes that her fears and apprehensions were lifted when she could begin to imagine that there were aspects about herself as witnessed in her life story and through her group peer support, that offered hope and possibility for taking risks. Within the group setting Tammy not only challenged family myths about the work place but was also able to utilize group support in understanding how to get transportation to the work place when buses and public transportation are on weekend and holiday schedules. She was also able to allay many basic fears in the work place by expressing them in the group and by strategizing meetings between herself, her supervisor and her Career Resource Specialist. As a result Tammy was actually able to form a friendly alliance with her work supervisor and fellow employees. She left ready to challenge the fears that had become perpetually imbedded as myths from her family and from her life experiences. Tammy believes that others can change if they could find a way to believe in themselves and to stop some of the fear based myths and feelings that have become personal reality.

After years on welfare, Tammy Herrick now works at On the Border Restaurant in South Portland, ME. (*Portland Press Herald*, Feb 7, 2006 Section C).

## **Internal realities critical to job success**

*Most traditional welfare to work programs focus on the nuts and bolts issues, such as searching for a job, filling out applications and writing a resumé. What they don't have is the encouragement, or ability to believe in themselves.* (Susan Abel, Program Director for Work Opportunities Unlimited of Maine)

Coming from families that suffered from poverty, deprivation, personal trauma and loss, many welfare recipients move from one program or one agency to another. There is seldom an opportunity to step back from the system or from the personal struggle to assess what abilities, skills or experiences are already in place.

Changing Perceptions Creating New Identities In The Workplace is a new program which forms a collaboration between Work Opportunities Unlimited and the State Departments of Human Services. The group program helps welfare recipients to get past the barriers that keep them from working.

More important than the issues of childcare, transportation and paying the rent are the deeper issues of low self-esteem and the constant 'fright-flight' response to the countless ways that people feel hurt and triggered by the world around them. Such triggers are not just a defensive response path on the role of victimization as they are the accumulation of unresolved, anger, grief and traumatization.

Rediscovering a memory of well-being from their own life story is where the process begins. There is nothing outside that can confirm or empower the need for belonging and feeling acceptance. Internally people re-acquaint themselves through their life stories with the ways that they have been able to survive and even prosper in the past. Most group members recall specific relationships, people who have believed in them and at one point or another loved them for who

they were. Re-connecting to such memories and narratives creates an essential building block for building trust and safety.

Tammy found singing throughout her life story as a means of healing, love and connection. One other group member recalls fishing with her father at 5 years of age. Watching her father cast his line over and over again without catching any fish, she suddenly had an idea. Close by another fisherman had caught plenty of fish and secured them in his plastic bucket. With little hesitation she secured fish from the person's catch and placed them in her father's bucket. When her father and the other fisherman discovered what was going on, they burst into gales of laughter. Embracing his daughter, her father appreciated her efforts. Her father created a friendship with the other fisherman and his daughter never forgot the importance of joy and laughter.

Her father died when she was 10 years old. What has never died is her need for humor and laughter amongst herself and her peers. Finding work partners where laughter and humor is a part of the culture is essential to her well-being.

By focusing on the strengths that people have, and recalling positive and tough times and how people got through them uncovers the possibility of how these positive attributes can lead in life and work situations.

## **Self-reflection**

Changing perceptions about the workplace can be difficult. Yet, at the base of any outward change is the need to change from within. The group process allows for such possibility by providing the peer support and structure to rediscover inner values, beliefs and reasons for feeling positive about oneself and one's life. People, who struggle so deeply with self-esteem issues, seldom have the opportunity to reflect. Providing the creative space to both reflect and to reassess often results in the emergence of forgotten yet significant inner resilience and strength. As Tammy Herrick so well articulates, living constantly with an internal state of fear, apprehension and trauma makes the outside world seem like a fearful place.

Group members locate their highest regard and deepest connections

to significant relationships. Frequently relationships to their children lead as a topic in group discussions. As one group member recalls: 'My kids, they are my world and I will go out because of them.' Another group member identifies that it was the death of a close and loved nephew and the resulting counseling which forced her to move forward with her life. This same group member recalls that grade school kids were tough on her. Because of a loving and supportive family, she was able to: 'Sharpen the characteristics of her resiliency.' Again another group member cites how his: 'children encouraged him to know there is a lot to live for.' This same man remembers that his Nana would always say: 'you can do it, so stop saying you can't.'

The voices, memories and positive feelings associated with people who care, support and love are located in the past as well as in the present. Such positive energy becomes the catalyst for a change in perception of what is possible. Connecting such inner memories with peer support and the ongoing connection to the Career Resource Specialist, as well as the uncovering of new awarenesses through inventories, discussion, guided imagery and personal reflection, begin to create a more solid notion of work as a place of fulfillment rather than a place of fear.

In reflection on her life story one group member said: 'Doing something to improve you is a big leap for your kids.' Others talked about how important it was to find something that you can believe in. As much as members of the group could discuss advocating for their children, few felt comfortable advocating for themselves.

Changing the perception of themselves as being capable, with clear intentions and positive feelings about finding personal success in the workplace is a central theme throughout the process. Making these connections at a deep and personal level begin to be predictors in finding satisfaction and balance on the job. Unlike other programs that focus on missing skills and abilities, Changing Perceptions emphasizes the strengths perspective and capitalizes on forging new connections between personal reality and employment opportunity.

## Summary

Joining people who have suffered unimaginable personal injury means being able and willing to invite the realm of possibility. The deeper strength of humanity is not to comprehend and measure the nature and degree of human vulnerability and suffering, but instead to acknowledge such pain in a way that joins mankind in the struggle for healing and recovery. To assume that such injury is not reversible and to assume that such people may never change is to perpetuate human disempowerment and oppression. Intrinsic to change is the ability to safely hold such pain while at the same time being able to imagine something different.

It is how such stories get illuminated and heard that honors the resource of human love and universal support for change and transformation. Throughout this twelve week program participants not only got to tell their life stories and be heard, but more importantly got to rediscover the roots of their own resiliency. Interestingly enough most of these memories emerged from childhood.

Developing the skills to self-soothe and to safely hold their own feeling realities was critical to the change process. Networking within the group, helping clients to create networks within the community, creating decision making trees and teaching some rudimentary goals with mindfulness reinforced patterns of self-efficacy and the ability to learn new skills and understandings. Ultimately the challenge was not to avoid being triggered, but rather it was necessary to have strategies that helped one not to repeat the same patterns. Both at work and at home there was an opportunity to change myths that were previously unexplored.

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